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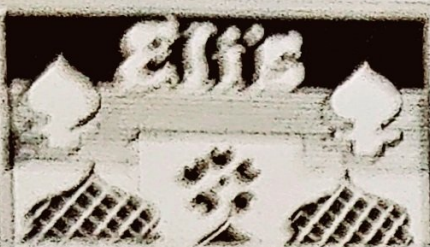
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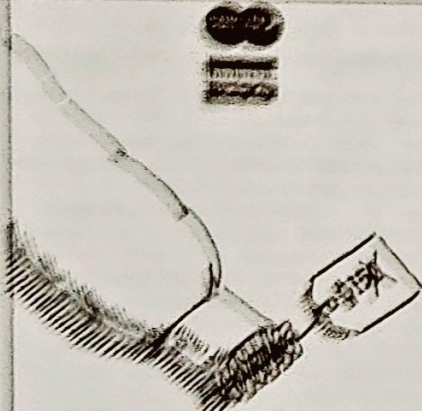
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STALKING LEATHERFACE



By George Lellis

"It's a film about meat, about people who have gone beyond dealing with animal meat and rats and dogs and cats," said the director as the wind howled outside. "crazy retarded people going beyond the line between animal and human." The film is *Leatherface*, the director, Tobe Hooper, and the place, an old house just outside Austin which resembles the one in *Psycho*.

The first horror movie ever to be made in Austin is an unsettling mix of funny and terrifying elements. *Leatherface* was inspired by a factual occurrence 20 years ago in Wisconsin. A man had been robbing graves and luring children and others to their deaths for several years. Finally it was discovered he had been both satisfying a cannibalistic appetite for his victims and putting their bones to creative use by building furniture and other objects for his home—not a bad subject for a horror film and all the more horrible for being true.

Leatherface's script, written by Kim Henkel and director Hooper, takes off from this point of departure to create a crazy family of four men who terrorize and finally kill all but one of a group of youths traveling through a sparsely populated part of Texas.

Indoor scenes of the film were shot at night to avoid the heat and I drove out this past Aug. 12 to the location near Round Rock to watch what was to be a hard day's night of shooting. The set, the den of the grisly family, is an imposing, cluttered mess of chicken feathers, simulated splattered blood, and, of course, bones, bones, bones. Lamps, chairs, ashtrays, footstools, and *objets d'art* all made of bones festoon the room. Pelts and skins also decorate the wall.

"We used parts of eight cows, two dogs, a cat, two deer, three goats, two real human skeletons, one chicken, and an armadillo," said Robert Burns, the set's designer. "There are only about 10 plastic bones in the whole set."

The effect was eerie. At times, one could all but smell the bloodshed, both animal and human, which the house was supposed to have contained; at other times, it would all seem too much and become morbidly comical.

The sky darkens. A wind blows up. It looks like rain. And the house, seen from outside, starts to look more and more haunted, more and more ominous. The crew, too busy to notice, is constructing a plywood screen on the porch to protect the camera if it should start to shower. But the rain

never comes and shooting begins unbothered by the world outside.

The scene begins with two of the brothers entering the house, carrying a female intruder, Sally, wrapped in a gunnysack.

Leatherface, named thus because he always wears human masks, comes in from the kitchen. He is wearing a mask from the face of an old lady, more comic than terrifying. And with the apron around his huge torso, *Leatherface* now looks more like an oversize grandmother from a TV situation comedy.

The effect is both serio-comic and a bit off-putting; it will look either very inventive or ludicrous on screen. As *Leatherface* comes in, making animal-like grunts, his brother angrily chases him back to the kitchen, beating him off camera with a stick and shouting "You damn fool!"

The shot is comparatively simple, with one long "cover" shot containing a single short zoom. A close-up, to be inserted is also to be made. Once the camera and lights are ready, Hooper runs through the action and blocks it with the actors. He directs three takes of the whole before proceeding to the close-up. Sally struggles convincingly, the actors all hit their marks, correctly, there are no technical prob-

lems: the takes should be fine.

Watching Hooper direct holds certain surprises. He is a rather small, slight-looking man, and, with the exception of the big cigars he smokes, he is devoid of Stroheim-like extravagances on the set. Yet he exudes, at least on that night, a self-assurance and authority, and above all a calm as he works. For such a young man (30) with only one feature behind him (*Eggshells*, which had its Austin release last year) he nonetheless gives the impression that it *should* be him, Hooper, in charge and not one of the crew, many of whom are graduate students in film at UT and are fairly accomplished, if fledgling, directors in their own rights.

He was to need both this confidence and seeming tranquility for the next take, a lengthy one involving a traveling shot going from outside the house's dining room where the girl is being tied up to a deep focus beyond into the kitchen. The camera was to follow the youngest brother as he runs from the kitchen and up the stairs, then pan away from him and truck back to the dining room where the oldest brother is now trying to quiet his captive.

Hooper was adamant about getting the movements between actors and camera perfectly synchronized. "It's pointless to do it so complexly if we're going to have to cut it up," he said. The camera's trucking back and forth, plus the pan to and away from the moving figure running up the stairs, was rehearsed and made smooth in itself, then rehearsed with the actors.

This made for, I was told, one of the shooting's slowest nights, but I was amazed at the carbon copy uniformity of performance that the actors seemed to produce in each rehearsal and take.

It will be an odd shot no doubt, for in it many of the film's comic elements come suddenly to the fore: grandmother-Leatherface wiping his hands on his apron and carrying a platter of supposed human flesh out to the dining room table; the electric-lit totem pole of bones glowing next to the tied up girl; the hitchhiker's broad blowing of a raspberry as he prances grotesquely up the stairs. And, above all for me, was Siedow's line at the end, something like, "Don't worry, miss, we'll get you some dinner," which made me laugh each time he said it.

Earlier Burns brought me out to the trailer where the actors were relaxing





Top left: Leatherface (sans mask) and his family listen to director Tobe Hooper explain a bit of bloody business. Top middle: The "victims" talk with co-author Kim Henkel (left, back) and Hooper (middle). Top right: Leatherface, dressed in an old lady's apron, wig, and human mask, serves some goodies. Middle left: Film crew eagerly hangs on to the struggle between Leatherface and his female victim. Middle right: Crew coordinates sound, camera, lights, and luck. Bottom: The whole family, Hitchhiker, The Old Man, Grandfather, and Leatherface, gathers for dinner beneath a human mask lantern.

before shooting began and introduced me to the cast. Some, like Edwin Neal, a UT graduate student in theatre who plays the blood-thirsty hitchhiker who turns out to be a villain—were involved in elaborate make-up jobs. Neal's make-up, for example, took three hours to apply and involved the creation of three different kinds of scars and scabs.

Others there included Gunnar Hansen, Leatherface himself, the constantly-masked, feeble-minded giant; Jim Siedow, a formerly full-time, now part-time actor who works for a commercial furnishings outfit in Houston, who plays the oldest brother; and Marilyn Burns, who plays Sally, the major female character in *Leatherface*.

Hansen is a little concerned that his performance as Leatherface may not be taken as real evidence of his acting ability.

"It would, except I play a character you don't see—my face is never seen. People might not take that as being acting," said Hansen, whose cordiality contradicts his heavily built 6'4" frame.



Hansen, born in Iceland, is a former Scandinavian studies graduate student and has lived in Austin on and off for 12 years. Not a stranger to greasepaint, he essayed a similar role several years ago as Lenny in a Texas Union production of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

"Camera acting is much more difficult than theatre," Hansen said, "because of the necessity of focusing all my attention for the single shot, then breaking when the shot is over."

Before shooting began Hansen studied for the Leatherface role at the Austin State School, observing the retarded to pick up some of the outward characteristics. When asked whether the film would strengthen popular misconceptions about the mentally retarded, Hansen said, "I would hope that people would take it

that Leatherface is violent not because he is retarded but because he is insane."

Hansen's part, as the pathetic though repulsively violent near-monster, has some of the earmarks of a classic and optimism on the set has run high. There is talk of his becoming, should the film catch on, a standard horror figure on the order of Frankenstein and Dracula, or at least the subject for a sequel. Would Hansen do the role of Leatherface again? How would he feel about becoming another Boris Karloff?

"I wouldn't mind more Leatherface movies, but the tragedy for Karloff is he loved children (but frightened them)," said Hansen, who has worked in children's theatre. "And I don't want to get stuck in that."

(Continued on page 22)

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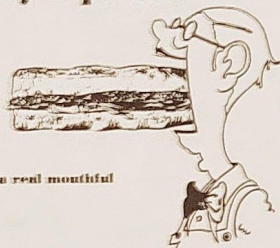
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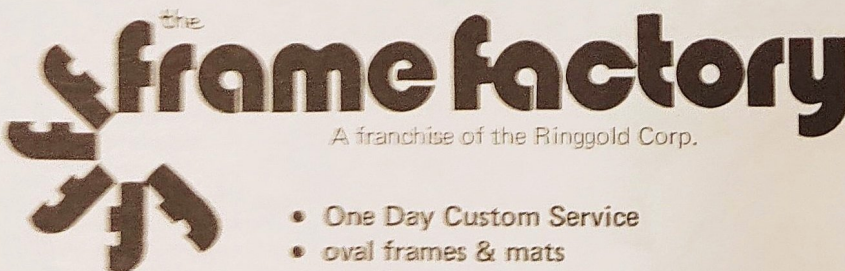
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(Continued from page 15)

Leatherface's vis-a-vis, as it were, is the character Sally, played by Marilyn Burns, a blonde, voluble girl with a habit of answering questions in short, direct sentences.

"It's an interesting part," said Marilyn. "Sally's a bubble-gum, bland, dumb character. In the end she's strong, the only one that gets away." By the end of pre-shooting preparation, Marilyn's shirt is ripped, her pants dirtied up, scars and dirt applied to her face and body: she has, in the film, just been beaten and has jumped through an open window.

I asked her how it felt to be used here as the object of so much screen violence. Marilyn laughed and pointed out the fact she is the only character to come out alive.

"I just get a few cuts and bruises. I don't consider myself the object of violence at all."

How is working in Austin? Marilyn, a UT drama graduate now model and actress and, recently, understudy for Blythe Danner in the Texas-made *Molly, Gid, and Johnny*, likes it. Marilyn cited the help the film has gotten from the Texas Film Commission, then said, "It's worth it to be here. I would never have had the chance in L.A."

Bill Parsley, something of an advisor to the film's makers, agreed that Austin is a fine place to shoot a film. Though the talent here may be lacking somewhat in the very concrete assembly-line level of experience at making films, he said, this seemed more than made up for in the high level of interest with which everyone seemed to be throwing themselves into the project.

"You still have a lot of enthusiasm here. Austin has some technological advantages—crew—that you might not otherwise have in a town this size. The whole state has more talent than most people realize."

Parsley credited the University of Texas and the Texas Film Commission (of which he had been a member until recently) for contributing to *Leatherface*. The commission has been working with government agencies like the Texas Highway Department and the Travis County Sheriff's office. "What they've done," Parsley said "is to smooth the road, to help others get the job done."

Austin a film center? Well, a swallow doesn't make a summer. But if *Leatherface* makes it big—and there is

some evidence that it may—it will be all the further evidence of talent here emerging on a truly professional level.

To be able to judge for yourself, you must wait for the film's release, expected for sometime this fall in Austin. I left Round Rock eager to see the finished product, excited to see if *Leatherface* would succeed in getting audiences to laugh and squirm in rapid succession.

(Props used in the grisly *Leatherface* set, under the somewhat whimsical title *Memories of Meat*, will be on display at the University of Texas Union Art Gallery from Oct. 22 to Nov. 2.) ■

(Continued from page 6)

apparently killed himself, in addition to the methadone. Finally, when he realized that he had reached rock bottom and that death was a very near possibility, he checked into a private mental hospital in San Antonio. It was a long, tortuous road back to health, but he managed it.

He seemed fully recovered and started writing music again, giving his friend Bill Gibbons the song "Francene," which was ZZ Top's first hit. Steve and his wife and two children were settling down in a new house in San Antonio and he was preparing to cut an album for Ode. Then, Aug. 8, he choked to death in his sleep. Autopsy findings have not yet been released. Cassell Webb, who now sings with the Austin group Blanche Fury, said his death was "just a horrible accident. The whole band had just gotten back together and Steve was getting the music ready."

Music was, next to his family, his whole life. He totally immersed himself in his compositions and had written about 800 songs, ranging from highly personal ballads to flat-out, screaming rock 'n' roll. His idol was Mick Jagger and, when Steve was at the height of his career, he began anticipating Jagger's music. Six months before the Rollings Stones' *Brown Sugar* album, Steve recorded an album at home that uncannily predicted the Stones' next work. Unfortunately, due to his erratic personal life, Steve was never able to do much with his music. His career was a series of false starts.

At the time of his death, hard-luck rocker Steve Perron's only album, *Rebirth*, was selling for 44 cents in discount stores in his hometown, San Antonio. ■

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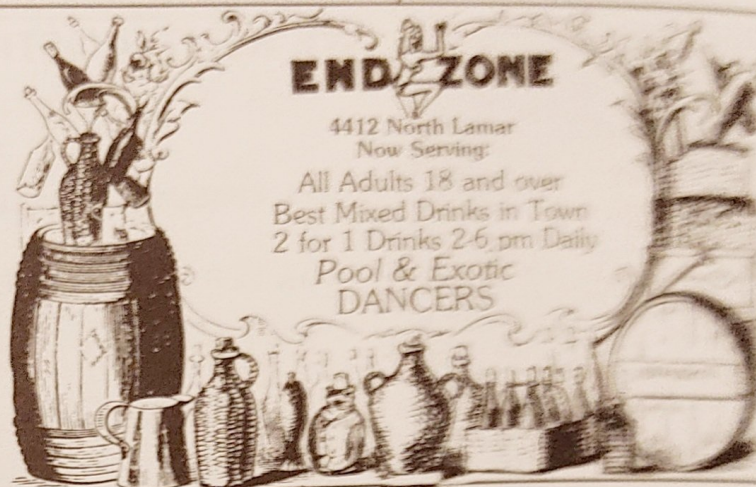
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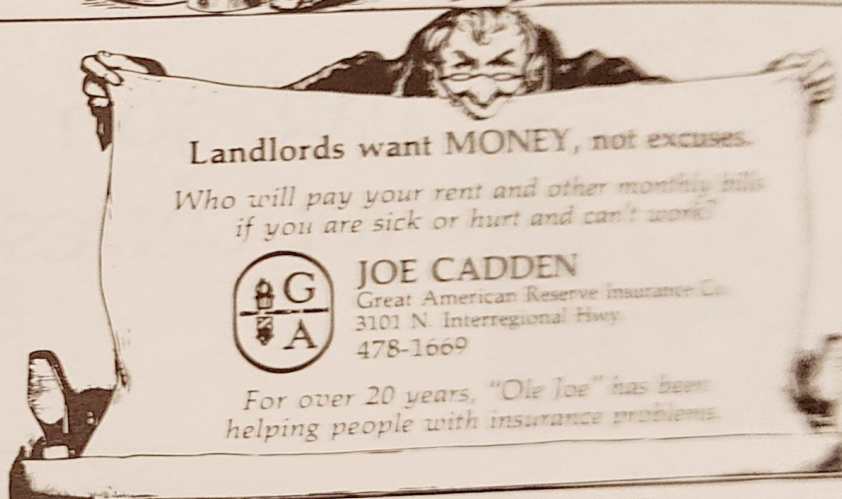
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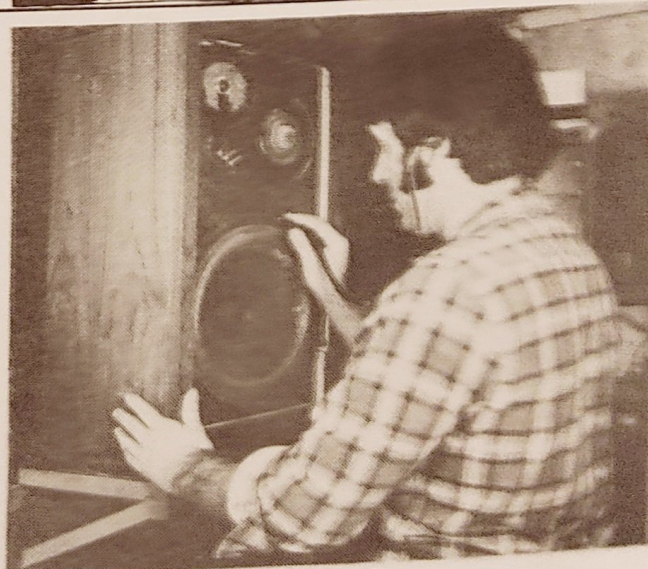
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